

## Chapter 11

Normally I beat up a monster and afterwards I felt great, but Koschei was on my team, technically. Normally I would have had Mercy and Asher there to cheer me on, and talk about how awesome I was, or what an idiot I was. Both were fun honestly. But here, alone in the dark, covered in blood and hurting all over, I did not feel awesome.

I tried to remind myself that it was worth it. "Two tiers in one go, that's the good stuff."

My body was a real mess, but so long as I stayed still, my health was holding steady.

[142/890 Health]

Wow, that was even worse than I'd expected. As soon as Restoration came back up I was using it. If Asher was here, I probably would have let him use the nasty burny healing spell he had on me, the one that felt like pouring lava in your wounds, that was how bad my current state was.

The silence stretched out again. Nope. None of that. I reached out to turn Koschei's head around to face me. The light in his eyes was out. His flesh was still here instead of fading away. He was really dead.

"Man, I wish you weren't a big bag of dicks like Leo. I really could have used some help with the whole end of the world thing."

I wobbled the head from side to side and put on a squeaky voice. "I'm sorry Maulkin, maybe the next Eternal you meet won't need murdered."

"Well I don't know about that buddy." I sighed. "I mean, first there was Talon, then there was Leo, now there's you. I'm starting to think every Eternal on the whole planet might be an asshole."

"Not all of them!" The head lolled onto the side after that wiggle and I had to prop it back up again.

"Yes, all of them." I spun him in a slow circle with a finger in the middle of his forehead. "I guess all the decent ones gave up, or ran away, or got minced up and turned into abominations. I think that's where the abominations came from anyway..."

Koschei squeaked, "Maybe I could have told you if you hadn't chopped my head off."

I flicked him on the nose. "Well maybe you could have just told me useful stuff instead of being a dick."

Staring down at the dead face of Koschei, I giggled a little bit to myself. Then laughing hurt, so I stopped. "Okay, talking to a severed head, probably not a good sign."

"Probably not." Koschei replied, so I turned him around to face away.

I had time to kill, so I might as well make the most of it and do some of the fiddly admin stuff that came along with being a demigod. I closed my eyes, and cast my attention to the glowing Pillars of Divinity within me.

Taking care to ignore the temptation of the Void Pillars and all the cool new stuff they might be hiding within them, I immediately poured some of my hard won Glory into Aether. Part of that decision was because I'd just learned that you could basically throw ghosts at somebody as an attack like Koschei had been bombarding me with, but mostly it was housekeeping. I needed to power up my Soul Bonding so that I could latch it onto the next Shard that came into my possession and make sure we never lost it. There was a little trickle of worry about that whole plan, since I kept getting more and more Void flavored with every shard I harnessed to my soul, but unless somebody came up with a better solution, I was sticking with it. Even if we did come up with a better plan, an extra soul bond would give me the chance to bring along a weapon or some armor every time I died. That would be helpful as hell. Maybe even some amazing magical artefact, if we ever found any. I assumed that Amaranth had amazing magical artefacts that weren't just rusty bits of an old sword. Probably.

My crappy gear was definitely starting to weigh on my mind. Not just the lack of wonderous magic objects, but the diminishing returns on the bare minimum stuff I'd scraped together. Every monster I ran into was able to chomp right through the can to the delicious Maulkin spam inside. And hitting Koschei over and over while my useless blunt sword barely made a dent in him, that was just depressing.

New equipment was definitely in order. Artifice was probably the pillar I used the most often, but I'd invested the least amount of Glory into it. That didn't seem right. Plus I had a whole swathe of skills in it that would level up when I empowered the Pillar. Sure pouring some glory into Primal might have unlocked some new healing powers and gotten me out of the jam I was in right this second, but getting better armor and weapons might make the difference between ending a fight untouched and having all these holes poked in me all over again. Look at me, delaying gratification like a big smart boy. Mercy would be so proud.

At the end of the day, the changes I was making to myself were permanent. I couldn't just go chasing after whatever shiny new thing I fancied each time that I grew in power. Tempting as that might have been. I dumped the rest of my Glory into Artifice, then gave myself a look over.

### ***Maulkin – Chagnar Faun of the Lunar and Void Court – 9<sup>th</sup> Tier of Glory***

#### ***Statistics:***

*HP: 522/1270*

*Devotion: 240/240*

#### ***Attributes:***

*Potency: 47*

*Celerity: 22*

*Vitality: 19*

*Piety: 8*

Well that took care of the worries about bleeding to death down here on the floor of some dank cave. I still wasn't better off proportionally, but as the increased Tiers of Glory refined my spirit into something more godlike, my body seemed to follow in its footsteps. That was probably one of the things that bugged me the most about the whole investing a whole tier's worth of glory into a void pillar thing. Not that I had marked my soul eternally with evil or whatever, but that I hadn't got the sweet health bump. I

mean, sure, the Void and all of its powers are antithetical to all life, but couldn't it have given me a little health increase anyway? I was probably lucky it hadn't taken health away, to be honest.

With the increased power in my Pillars, I should have unlocked a whole swathe of new divine skills or divinities or whatever they were called, and after hoarding experience from most of my training with Seren as well as the last few days, I had over a thousand points to spend buying new cool tricks.

A glance confirmed that Rough Hewn Weapons, Armor and Architecture had evolved into Inferior Weapons, Armor and Architecture which uh, still didn't feel great to be honest, but it was an improvement. Improving Artifice had also extended my Sphere of Influence even further than it had reached before. The whole cave was inside it now, a bit of the tunnel too. I couldn't feel any of them because of the Voidgod's malign influence on this place, but once I got somewhere alive, I was going to have a great time. I might even be able to help the Dvergar with their mining back at home, hauling out some ores from hard to reach places. No wait, that sounded too much like a job. Never mind. Maybe I could just tell them where to dig for the good stuff.

Aether was up to three tiers now, so there was a lot of new stuff unlocked in there, but so much of it was kind of... obtuse? Like, yeah sure Astral Projecting out of my body might be handy sometimes, but you know what was always good? Hitting stuff harder. Trapping unbound spirits and crystalising them into a material that could be used to forge magic gear? Okay yeah that one did sound cool, but it looked like the actual crafting stuff came further up the Aether ladder and I was in no hurry to climb it since I spent more of my time trying not to use Aether than actually using it. The only one I definitely wanted was Spirit Strike. After being on the receiving end of a ghost-slap to the brain, there was no way I could let it pass, so pop, there went three hundred of my hard earned experience points.

Ascension skills were pretty scarce, apart from the Surge ones. I seemed to unlock new Divinities in that tree when I'd maxed out the normal skill equivalent. So I had Ascendant Brutality, and not much else. I was really good at hitting things hard. Woo. Go me. Ascendant Cognition was there, greyed out, and I had no idea what those words meant together until I dipped my attention into it and realised it was about refining my brain into something more... godly. Shame I hadn't invested enough Glory in Ascension to use it.

I toyed with the idea of Celerity Surge, both so I could jog back to the Bastion faster, and so I could surprise the crap out of Orphia the next time she tried to do her own superspeed trick. That would have been really funny, but it didn't suit the way that I fought. I was not big on running away from my problems, or dodging all that much if I was being honest. Most of the time if I dodged out of the way, it meant that whoever was standing behind me would get whacked instead. If I did that, and Mercy got hurt, I would never hear the end of it. Literally never, she was going to live forever, and even three thousand years from now I could imagine she'd still be dunking on me for that one time I ducked and she got a club to the face.

Vitality Surge seemed like a better option. Being able to shrug off blows like Koschei had would be much more helpful for my career as a meat shield. Yeah, that felt right. I sank another three hundred in.

Which left me enough for one more Divinity. One more uber powerful god-tier move that I could use to turn the tide of a battle. I couldn't think of one.

The siren call of all the Divinities in the Void Pillar I'd unlocked was hard to ignore, but I was pretty sure that using any of them was going to draw attention. I'd already splurged experience there just after we beat Talon and I hadn't even dared to try out that power yet, even when I'd been all alone in the desert. Just in case somehow somebody spotted me and immediately sounded all the Voidgod alarms.

Nobody knew how much experience I had except me. Nobody needed to know if I kept on buying guilty little secret powers. Yet somehow I still felt ashamed when I shuffled over to the list of them and started looking through. While all the other words glowed with moonlight in my mind, these ones were so black that they stood out even in the darkness of my inner self. Wow that sounded super goth.

Then I sat there staring at them and dithered for so long that Restoration ticked back to life.

I'd save my experience for later. It wasn't a big deal. There might be some helpful skill I wanted to grab on the fly, like that time I'd learned sailing.

I slipped back into my body and triggered Restoration before I'd even opened my eyes. The ice had all melted away by now, so the wounds were wide open for the stitching. They prickled as they closed, but that was nothing compared to the weird sensation of whatever sweetmeats Koschei had popped when he gut-punched me re-inflating inside me. The noise that I made when I felt that was not dignified.

Finally, I opened my eyes.

There was a spear levelled at my face. I could have done without that. Mhirka was the one holding it. I could have done without that too. Arrayed behind her, taking up the whole of this cramped little cave, were the gathered chieftains of every Faun clan. Looming, colossal things so large it was hard for me to even read them as Faun instead of some sort of lumbering ogres. They had to bow their heads to stop their horns sticking in the pitted roof, and I realised with a start that most of the pits in the roof were probably from their previous visits. All of them were staring at me.

"Good morning."

Tear rimmed Mhirka's eyes. She had not touched dead Koschei, but it was pretty obvious what had happened to him since I was down here covered in his blood.

She thrust her spear for my throat and I only just had time to Surge Vitality before it struck home and killed me. As it was it jabbed in, hard as a finger would have prodded a human throat, making me cough and gag. "Hey! Knock it off."

She looked from me to the spear with dread and confusion. She knew it was sharp, she'd been killing bugs with it just a few hours back.

The chieftains were not so quick to action. One of them laid a hand on Mhirka's shoulder to draw her back and she shrugged it off violently, but seemed to take the hint. She didn't try to stab me again.

My voice came out strangled until I spluttered a little more. "The strongest one is in charge, right? That's how this all works?"

I could see the betrayal on Mhirka's face contending with her dread and hatred, what a mix. She looked like most of the women I'd ever been on a blind date with. There was sure to be some guilt in there, like she had been the one to give me the idea to kill their beloved pet Eternal. As if he hadn't made that decision for himself thousands of years back when he decided to make them into slaves.

I looked past Mhirka to the gathered giants. "I killed him. I was stronger. So the way that she tells it, that makes me the boss now, right?"

"Khoschei did not rule us." Giant hammer chief rumbled. "He was not Chagnar."

"But you listened to him. He was your advisor, and the advisor of the one that came before you, and all the other ones before that too, right? He spoke to the ancestors?"

They were looking around at each other, the full magnitude of what I'd done just sinking in. I might have accidentally just killed their whole religion as well as the little tyrant that had perched himself on top of it. Oops.

Through her tears, Mhirka snarled. "He spoke for our dead. He told us their will."

"Okay," Well, I'd already come this far, might as well go the distance and get murdered by the angry mob. Time for the moment of truth. "That was a lie."

That seemed to hit them even harder than the realisation I'd cut them all off from their ancestors. Rippling out through the room. Some of them paled. Some of them flushed with rage. Color changing Faun. Great.

I wet my lips, tasting my own blood, and then I pressed on. "He was telling you what he wanted you to do, what he wanted you to be. Maybe he really was listening to your ancestors, maybe not, but the Chagnar who went before, they didn't want you to come here. They don't want you to suffer."

Double axe chief had both of his axes in his hands. Maybe he didn't have anywhere else to put them. Maybe he hadn't come down here to chop me into chunks. He roared, "They were Chagnar, they would have wanted us to..."

I didn't need to shout for my words to cut him off dead. "To be weak?"

Every Faun in the cave bristled when I said that, all of them except Mhirka. She was staring down at the cave floor, some long rusted machinery between her ears rattling slowly to life. That was fighting talk. I'd just insulted them all. This was going to end in a mess. I could already tell.

"You don't make a people strong by culling their numbers. You don't make them strong by taking them into the desert and starving them. If the Faun want to be strong again, a force to be reckoned with in this world, they need to change." I said it all in a rush so that they couldn't shout me down before the end, but I needn't have bothered. They were all staring at me in abject silence.

The tallest of the Faun pushed forward through the crowd, a woman bent almost double to keep the curled horns on her head off the roof. She had to twist her neck to glare at me. "Who are you to tell us that we must change? Our ways have been the same since the stars first shone on Amaranth. We have always been here."

"Who am I? I'm the guy who just walked in here, fresh off the boat, and beat the most powerful Eternal in your camp."

That seemed to shut them up all over again. They might not like what I was saying. They might not have liked me. But under their own stupid system, they had to listen to me, because I'd killed the guy that they listened to before. There was no denying it, I still had the cleaver lying beside my hand.

No wonder they'd signed up with the Voidgod when all you had to do to get them on your side was be the biggest bully on the block.

"Now maybe Koschei made it all up. Maybe he told you this was the way your people had always lived so that he could make you behave the way he wanted you to. But let's say that he was telling the truth. You've all done things the same since the dawn of time?" I took a deep breath. Every time I suggested that Koschei was a filthy liar, they seemed to get upset about it. Oh well. "Maybe you have, maybe Koschei just kept you doing the same things you'd always done, but the world hasn't stayed the same. If you want to survive in the world we're living in now, then you need to change."

Mhirka didn't look up from the bloodstains on the floor. She was working through all of this at her own pace. Hearing my words, but thinking about other stuff. She mumbled. "The ancestors spoke through him."

I had my suspicions about that. "Yeah? Did it look something like this?"

When I used Spirit Strike it wasn't nearly as impressive as the perfect storm of spirits that Koschei had been able to invoke. All I mustered was a pathetic little whisp, shooting out from my forehead to whack into Mhirka's. It didn't carry fear or doubt or anything like it. Just my horrible certainty that he'd been lying to them all along.

She raised a hand to touch the spot on her head where the spooky little puff had hit her. All of the other Faun were gawking at me. If I had to guess then I'd say that was exactly what it had looked like when the ancestors spoke through him.

She looked at me without hate in her eyes, possibly for the first time since I'd met her. "How did you... What did you..."

I pushed my Aether again, and another little white whisper of a thought sprang out of my head and shot out, past Mhirka to pass invisibly through double-axe guy's thick skull. Koschei lied. That same whisper. Again and again and again I pushed that thought out, feeling some reserve of power I'd never touched before draining with each one I unleashed. It didn't leave me feeling dumber or weaker or anything like that, just kind of hollow inside. Maybe that was what Asher felt like after doing one of his big spells. I'd have to ask him one of these days. Either way, when I blinked my eyes shut after bombarding the whole

room's worth of chieftains with tiny ghosts I could see that my *Devotion* was down to 32 from the healthy 240 it usually sat at.

I took a deep breath to steady myself and then I spoke again. "Either you can believe that I speak for the ancestors now, or you can believe that Koschei was just using his powers to trick you all this time. I don't care which. So long as you listen to me."

Maybe cheering was too much to hope for after everything else that had happened today, but I'd kind of hoped that they'd all stop looking quite so desolate. No reason to feel bad about Koschei being dead, he was a dick. Although I suppose that now they were all feeling bad because they'd mindlessly obeyed someone who was using them for his own ends for millennia. Oops.

Finally, the giant hammer guy sank down onto one knee and asked me. "What would you have us do?"

At least I had an easy answer to that one. "Go away. Find somewhere pretty and green where the hunting is good, the land is fertile and the Faun can become strong again. Build homes. Make babies. Teach them things. When life stops being a struggle, it doesn't mean that you're going to get weaker, it means that you are winning. That you're stronger. Like lifting a big weight gets easier the more you do it."

You would think that I'd told them all to go and throw themselves off a cliff from the sour expressions.

Mhirka piped up again. Still desperately trying to cling to her anger. I couldn't blame her for that, it must have felt like someone had pulled the rug out from under her feet about now. "You would have us abandon this sacred place?"

"Who is it sacred to? It is a lump of dead rock in the middle of a dead desert made when some evil thing died thousands of years before you were even born." I pushed myself slowly to my feet, and was quietly pleased that my legs didn't give out after all the massive blood loss. Restoration really was awesome. I definitely needed to upgrade Primal again soon. "It's a gravestone for a monster that didn't deserve one. Why are you even here?"

"The enemy." The tall woman said to her own feet, "The Gilded Charlatan."

Two axe guy joined in, "He lurks behind the great wall, just waiting for us to show weakness."

"So let him lurk! He's been lurking since... always!" I shrugged. "Who cares if he takes this place?"

Mhirka snarled at me. Baring all those filed teeth at me again. Why did I find that kind of hot? Was it because I had a Faun body, or did I need therapy? "Do you care nothing for the ways of our people?"

"Not when they're stupid ways." I shrugged, and the ruined scraps of armor still clinging to my shoulder tumbled off to land with a thump. Desperately in need of an upgrade. "Not when they're making the Chagnar Faun weak."

Bulky hammer man barked, "Why do you care if the Faun are strong?"

“You think I choose this body for a joke? The Faun are the best thing about this crappy planet.” That drew some smiles from the gathered crowd. Flattery will get you anywhere, apparently. “If I can get you guys fighting fit again, then just imagine what you could accomplish.”

Mhirka’s eyes narrowed when I said “fighting fit.” She leapt on it, “You would make us your soldiers, your slaves?”

I laughed in her face. All these years, the Faun had been peons to some lying little Eternal, and now that someone was finally telling the truth she was scared that it just meant the mask was going to be pulled off. “I’m not going to make you anything. As soon as this conversation is done, I’m out of here. I’ve got my own stuff going on.”

The tall woman reached out a hand to me then snatched it back as if she’d just realised what she was doing. “You would rob us of even your guidance?”

“Guys, I don’t have any guidance. I don’t have any wisdom. I’m an idiot. But even an idiot can see that what you guys are doing out here isn’t making you happy, or strong, or... anything. I mean, you’re eating worms. You can’t tell me those taste good.”

There was some rumbled laughter, though none of the chieftains seemed willing to admit it was coming from them. Eventually hammer man admitted, “They are... foul.”

“You don’t need an Eternal to tell you how to live your lives. You don’t need the ghosts of dead people bossing you around either. You’re the Chagnar Faun. You’re the biggest badassess in all of Amaranth. You know how to hunt, how to fight, how to do all the things it takes to be awesome.” I pointed up the tunnel and let out an excited shout. “So go be awesome!”

They did. They took off. The press of bodies down here in the cave thinned and I turned away from them to get myself ready for the hike back across the ashes. I retrieved the spear and the cleaver, mashing them back together into a great-sword so I could slot it back into the baldric the Dvergar had made me. Then I scooped up Koschei’s head under one arm and turned to leave. He was going to be a lot more useful to me now than he’d ever been in life. Plus, he was an excellent conversationalist. That would make the long journey feel shorter.

Mhirka was still standing there when I turned around. “Uh... hi. Did you not buy the whole, go be awesome, thing?”

She was perfectly still, looking not at me, but at the headless body that had now tumbled to lie on the ground. “Why have you done this?”

“Because you people deserve better than to be toys for some stuck up...” I fumbled through a half dozen different words for extremely short people in my head, but I was pretty sure they were all slurs so I finally just said, “... Eternal.”

“You say that you do not want us. That you will not lead us. You mean to abandon us when we need guidance the most.” She stared at me as I made a show of checking I had all my things together. I wasn’t planning on coming back this way ever again, so leaving something behind was a no-no.



I shrugged as I went past her. "You need to lead yourselves. As you're super fond of saying, I'm no Chagnar. Find your own way."

"If you are not Chagnar, you are prey." She said prey like it was the tastiest word she'd ever had in her mouth. "Why would prey want us strong? When we will turn that strength against you?"

I crouched down in the centre of the mess that I'd made of this place. Blood and ice-melt had pooled down in the middle of the room, and I had to wipe it away with the flat of my hand before I could see the marks that the shards had left. Still scarred into the world. "Maybe I want a good fight if it comes to that? Maybe I'm a little bit Chagnar after all?"

She was staring at me so hard I was starting to get self conscious. Maybe I had a hunk of Koschei in my hair. Eventually, when I wasn't saying anything else, she squatted down beside me and looked at the marks. As if she might decipher some meaning in them. "What are you keeping from us?"

I debated telling her nothing, or spinning her a lie, but at the end of the day, that would make me no better than Koschei. She lived in this world, so she deserved to know the truth about what was going to happen to it. Everyone deserved to know. "Araphel. He's coming back."

There was no sudden gasp, no fainting away. She spoke with the same dubious contempt she'd treated everything I'd said to her from the start. "The Voidgod was slain."

I shoved off my knees to get back to standing. Some of the holes in my side were going to take another round of healing before I was back on top form. I really didn't fancy another wrestling match. "Why does nobody get the whole Eternal concept? Gods can't die. Whatever's stopped him coming back before now is going to stop working, then we've got Voidgod all over the place again."

"So you came to plead that we not join him?" She sneered at me.

"Uh no. I came to see if Koschei would help fight him. Turns out he was more interested in his own games."

She cast a glance to the dead man again. "You do not want the Faun to fight for you?"

"No offence, but you guys look like you're about one bad day away from dead. Maybe once you've recovered a little you might want to join in the Voidgod ass-whooping but... I'm not asking for anything." I gave Koschei's head a little wiggle. "You've had enough of Eternals making demands."

She nodded at that, slowly rising to her full height and scowling at me with all her might. "Our paths shall cross again."

I smiled at that. "I hope so."

She was not smiling. She was extremely not-smiling. "It may mean your death."

"Won't be the first." I shrugged. "Probably won't be the last either."

She walked me out, but we didn't have anything more to say to each other after that. She had a whole new world-view to work out, and I'd just killed the closest thing to an ally I might have found in the whole world. Neither of us were feeling chatty. When she slipped away, I didn't hear her go.

The whole settlement was in disarray as I strolled out. Tents being broken down, materials being gathered up into bundles, gardens being uprooted for whatever bounty they could offer before the long walk out of the desert. I took it all in without interfering. None of the Faun looked all that happy to be leaving, even though it would be to an easier, happier life. I suppose that they didn't know that yet, just that the place they'd called home was being snatched away from them yet again.

At least leaving the Faun settlement was easier than coming in. All I had to do was fall down off the stepped levels until I reached the bottom. If there were still sentries posted in the deep shadows that the moonlight cast, then I couldn't see them. Which was kind of the point I suppose.

I gave the whole thing one last long look, then I set off towards the distant horizon. Couldn't keep my adoring fans waiting after all, and there was no way that I wasn't going to be Leofric's new best buddy after chopping the head off his oldest enemy and killing him permanently. I was expecting a parade.

